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### The consequences of parental changes for children

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PAPER



**The consequences of parental changes for children:  
A comparative study**

Drs. Suzanne P.M. Dölle

WORC PAPER 94.07.034/6

This socio-demographic research project has been funded by the SRO Foundation of the Netherlands Organisation for the Advancement of Scientific Research (NWO) and was begun in December 1989 at Tilburg University by Professor G.A.B. Frinking (KUB) and Dr. P.A.M. van den Akker (IVA).

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# **The consequences of parental changes for children: a comparative study**

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*Keywords: divorce, remarriage, single-parent families, stepfamilies*

## **1. Introduction**

How do children fare in single-parent families and stepfamilies (reconstituted families) which have been formed following divorce or remarriage? It is believed that they do not fare very well. The general opinion is that growing up in a single-parent family or stepfamily has a negative effect on the development of children. It's thought that children in such families cope less well. Is this negative perception accurate?

This is the question that will be examined in this article. It tries to establish the extent to which this negative perception is supported by existing scientific literature and empirical research. Our data have not been taken from a problem group, but from a survey held among Dutch families: a written survey among 1600 parents of children in nuclear families, single-parent families and stepfamilies. These data are used to examine the living conditions and the development of children, in particular the differences between children from different types of families. The article also looks into the extent to which such differences are influenced by divorce and remarriage. For our study we used empirical data gathered by ourselves as well as insights provided by existing scientific literature. The article aims to present a more or less representative picture of the consequences of parental changes (through divorce and remarriage) for the living conditions and development of children.

Our findings were rather positive. Most children cope much better than is generally believed.

## 2. Literature

### *Explosive growth*

The number of divorces in the Netherlands shot up in the past decades, more or less stabilising in recent years. About one in three marriages ends in divorce. One in every five children is confronted with their parents' divorce while still a minor. These children grow up in a single-parent family for - at least - part of their childhood. At the same time, we see that remarriage following divorce is becoming more common. As a result, some of these children will grow up in a stepfamily which has been formed after the divorced parent remarries. The number of single-parent families and stepfamilies in the Netherlands has grown considerably in recent years. This means that a significant number of children spend their childhood in single-parent or stepfamilies.

### *Existing literature*

The general opinion on this issue - both in society at large and within the academic world - is negative. A question often posed is whether parental changes create unacceptable problems for the children involved. There is growing scientific interest in single-parent families and stepfamilies. Most research focuses on divorce and single-parent families. Stepfamilies, however, have received very little attention from scholars, and those studies which have been conducted - both in the Netherlands and elsewhere - hardly shed light on the position of children. Very little is known about the consequences for the children involved. On top of that, comparative studies are sadly lacking; children in single-parent and stepfamilies are not - or barely - compared with children in two-parent families (both biological parents present). Most research into this issue has been carried out in the United States. Very little indeed is known about the situation in the Netherlands. Not only is information lacking on changes in the basic living conditions of these children, but there is also very little insight - at least in the Netherlands - into the consequences of these changes for their development. We shall first review data provided by existing literature. A number of Dutch and international studies have been analyzed for the purpose of this article (see list of references). We shall present the findings of these scientific studies and make a few critical remarks on the research conducted.



### *Single-parent families or incomplete families?*

In recent decades there has been growing interest in single-parent families. Most studies have been conducted outside the Netherlands, in particular in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Apart from articles, books and manuals, useful reviews of literature and research in this field have also been published (Emery, 1982; Blechmann, 1982; Nelson, 1985; Amato & Keith, 1991). The phenomenon of single-parent families also drew the interest of scholars and the general public in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> Numerous studies into the living conditions and social status of single-parent families were carried out in the 1980's. Most of these studies drew attention to the practical drawbacks of single-parenthood. The dual responsibility carried by single parents is often considered to be a heavy burden. The financial situation of mother-headed families was considered to be particularly problematic.

Existing scientific literature paints a gloomy picture. Growing up in a single-parent family is considered to have an almost inevitable negative effect on the development of the child. Divorce is seen as one of the most traumatic events in a child's life. Children suffer from the sudden changes that occur after their parents split up and are often damaged for life. Single-parent families have long been considered a high-risk problem group. This negative viewpoint was substantiated by scientific evidence. Numerous studies showed that children from split families had problems and were deprived, not only emotionally but also socially, psychologically, physically and intellectually. Comparative research corroborated this negative point of view; children in single-parent families developed more slowly than children in two-parent households. There were differences in performance at school, social intercourse, health, wellbeing and self-respect. Children in single-parent families were more likely to be unhappy and insecure, to have psychological and behavioral problems and to be slow learners.

Nowadays, divorce and single-parent families are no longer exceptional phenomena. Society's negative image is gradually changing. The focus of scientific research is also changing. Research used to be based on descriptions of deviations from the norm. Researchers assumed that growing up in families that deviated from the traditional nuclear family would be detrimental to the upbringing of children.



Nowadays scholars take a milder and more qualified approach to life in single-parent families. It is no longer considered to be inferior, a breeding ground for problems. At the same time, they are beginning to study the problems faced by two-parent families, the cornerstone of society.

This has resulted in comparative studies which focus on the differences between children from single-parent and two-parent households. After all, the assumption that a particular living environment could be detrimental to the development of a child needs to be systematically analyzed by comparing it with an alternative. Current research treats single-parent families as a separate type of family, among many other types. Studies no longer focus exclusively on the negative aspects of life in a single-parent family; the positive aspects of the transition to a single-parent situation are also dealt with (Blechmann, 1982; Kanoy & Cunningham, 1984).<sup>3</sup> Living in a single-parent family generally has a positive effect on the wellbeing and sense of independence of children. Recent studies are also less pessimistic about the psychological damage caused by divorce. For example, divorce is also said to have a liberating effect on children: the conflicts in the nuclear family have made way for harmony and order in the single-parent family. In the long term, children from split families become more self-confident and performance-orientated (Oggenfuss, 1984) and they tend to adopt a more realistic approach to romantic relationships (Booth, Brinkehoff & White, 1984).

#### *Focus on the new stepfamily*

This study focuses on 'new stepfamilies' that are formed through remarriage following divorce. The new stepfamily is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon, but has received relatively little scientific attention until now. Although little is known about stepfamilies, scholars are beginning to give this phenomenon due attention (Aerts, 1989; Coleman & Ganong, 1990). Most scientific literature on stepfamilies comes from the United States. New stepfamilies did not draw widespread interest and attention until the 1970's. The first articles on this subject were published in sociological journals on the family, such as "Journal of Marriage and the Family"<sup>4</sup> and "Family Process".<sup>5</sup> Publications such as "Journal of Divorce", "Journal of Family Issues" and "Family Relations" also occasionally published articles on the new stepfamily.

Among social workers there was a growing need for more insight into problems accompanying

the formation of such families. Guides and handbooks gave practical advice and tips aimed at furthering family formation and the integration of new family members (Maddox, 1976). Journals such as "Social Work"<sup>6</sup> and "Social Casework"<sup>7</sup> published the experiences of clinicians in their dealings with stepfamilies. This trend was followed by psychological journals, witness articles published in "Psychology Today"<sup>8</sup> and "Family Relations". Visser & Visser wrote a classic book in which they give a detailed account of the problems which may arise in stepfamilies (Visser & Visser, 1979).<sup>9</sup> In the 1980's others followed suit: Cherlin (1981) and Furstenberg & Spanier (1984) wrote articles on the same subject from a theoretical and therapeutic perspective. The affinity of these authors with the subject matter stemmed either from personal experience as a stepparent or from their clinical experience in social welfare. Hetherington (1992) has also studied stepfamilies. She believes the attitude of stepparents and the children's age at remarriage of their parents are key factors. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead (1993) draws a negative picture of stepfamilies; many get into trouble, is her view. The general picture presented by existing literature is rather negative: as is the case in classical fairy tales, things don't go too well in single-parent families, and children in these families are deprived. These views are mostly based on research and experiences of social workers. Families that call in the assistance of welfare workers generally have problems at an early stage, when the new stepfamily is being formed. Needless to say, successful stepfamilies make less use of social welfare facilities, so clinical theoreticians do not get to see (and study) them. Since clinicians focus on problematic cases, they are in no position to provide insight into the average effects on average children. As a result, their views on stepfamilies as an environment to grow up in are rather negative.

In the Netherlands, stepfamilies began to draw scientific interest at a much later date. Scholars had to make do with a number of - translated - American books on the subject.<sup>10</sup> The first articles on stepchildren and stepparents that appeared in scientific journals date from the 1970's and early 1980's.<sup>11</sup> The review of literature on new stepfamilies which was drawn up by the Dutch Family Council in The Hague some years ago opened up a new field of social scientific research in the Netherlands (De Zwart, 1983). De Zwart points out that existing literature on stepfamilies mainly comes from the United States, and that the subject is generally not approached from the perspective of the children involved. She also states that the conducted research has considerable methodological shortcomings. Since that time, the Dutch situation has been studied. A recent survey held among 250 stepfamilies shows that Dutch stepfamilies do



not fare that badly at all (Spruijt et al., 1989). According to these researchers the negative image has been grossly exaggerated. This study does not concentrate solely on the problems encountered by stepfamilies. It also pays ample attention to the positive experiences of these families. The survey shows that there is no such thing as the typical stepfamily; various types of stepfamilies exist. We can distinguish three types of stepfamilies on the basis of their living arrangement: open, closed and divided families. One of the most remarkable research findings is that three-quarters of the children in stepfamilies develop favourably. Their adjustment to the new family situation improves gradually as new patterns and roles take shape. Stepparents who establish a positive relationship with the child and who do not immediately assume a prominent role in the child's upbringing tend to encounter fewer problems. In most families the most pressing problems have been overcome after a period of two years.

#### *Some critical remarks on existing scientific literature*

Existing socio-scientific literature does not provide much deeper insight into the influence of parental changes (through divorce and remarriage) on children. Research findings are often contradictory, creating confusion and ambivalence (Robinson, 1985). The argument that parental changes are detrimental to the development of the child has been both supported and refuted. Still, research in the Netherlands and elsewhere has largely supported the negative argument. Various reviews have drawn attention to the shortcomings of these studies, most of which do not stand the test of scientific criticism. The major points of criticism are set forth below.

#### *Methodological shortcomings*

According to Blechmann (1982) the major shortcoming of most studies is that background variables are not kept constant. By giving insufficient consideration to the disruptive influence of background variables, there is a greater chance that results will be misleading.

The general conclusion of scientific research is that children of single-parent families are disadvantaged compared with children of two-parent families. However, the differences found between the two groups of children can not be attributed directly to the family structure or the divorce experience. Other factors may also be responsible for the existing differences, such as social class or conflicts linked to divorce. That is why it is vital that the background variables



are kept constant where possible, in particular as far as income level goes (Van Gelder, 1990). Nelson (1985) draws attention to the disruptive influence of the family's socio-economic status (SES). Problems faced by families are more often linked to their difficult financial situation rather than to the family structure. So, when explaining differences between various types of families it is vital that factors such as gender, age, family size and SES are kept constant. Blechmann also draws attention to the use of invalid measuring instruments. Research results are often biased due to the researchers' own preconceptions and values. The methodological criticism expressed by Esses & Campbell (1985), Nolan, Coleman & Ganong (1985) focuses on the fact that a reliable representative sample is lacking; they also draw attention to the poor quality of the methods of analysis used.

### *Low theoretical quality*

Apart from the methodology, the theoretical basis of the various studies has also been criticised. In fact, most studies have no sound theoretical basis. This is quite a serious shortcoming since it is the theoretical framework that determines the definition of the problem and the choice of research instruments. On top of this, sound theoretical explanations for the influence of a single-parent or stepparent situation on children are lacking (Bosman & Louwes, 1989; Van Gelder, 1990).

### *Control groups lacking*

Another point of criticism is the fact that most studies did not have a suitable control group or reference group consisting of children who grow up in two-parent families, with both their biological parents. Surveys among children of single-parent families alone do not provide much insight into the situation. If no comparison is made with another population, it remains unclear why problems may arise. It is vitally important that the development of children in single-parent or stepfamilies is systematically compared with that of children who grow up in two-parent families. Only then can we determine whether these children face more, fewer or simply different problems than children in nuclear families.

In the Netherlands very little research has compared single-parent and two-parent families on the basis of a systematic analysis of differences in background and the way in which the families

were formed (Van Delft et al., 1988; Van Gelder, 1989; Dronkers et al., 1992, 1993). The main problem faced by researchers is that control groups are not large enough. Systematic comparisons are also few and far between in other European countries (Björnberg, 1992). Most studies which systematically compare various groups of children come from the United States, but the results can not be easily transposed to the Dutch situation.

Dutch studies show that there are differences between children who grow up in single-parent families and those who grow up in two-parent families, but the differences are relatively small. Further analysis shows that the type of family, or family structure, is not the main determinant. Other factors such as unsettling experiences accompanying divorce, social class, and income level play a very important role. Most differences concern their performance at school and level of education. As far as the latter is concerned, children from single-parent families do not perform as well as children from nuclear families (Bosman & Louwes, 1989; Dronkers, 1992). Recent research has also shown that the wellbeing of children in single-mother families is lower than that of children in single-father or two-parent families (Dronkers, 1993).

### **3. Theoretical perspective**

The traditional two-parent family (nuclear family) is generally believed to be the most suitable environment to grow up in. Single-parent families and stepfamilies are socially less accepted. Many people are of the opinion that children should grow up in a 'complete' family with their biological mother and father. The traditional nuclear family has been the norm for many decades. Deviant family structures did not meet the norm and were thus considered to be a bad family environment for children. These ideas were substantiated by scientific research.

#### *Different explanations*

The explosive increase in the number of divorces in the 1960's and 1970's prompted researchers to study the consequences of parental changes for the development of children. Theoreticians predicted that children whose parents had split up would suffer emotionally and psychologically. Divorce, it was believed, would by definition lead to behavioral problems. Various reasons were put forward to substantiate this argument. Most of the explanations were based on one of the following factors: the absence of a parent, financial problems or family conflicts.



Growing up in a two-parent family is better thanks to the presence and availability of both biological parents. The absence of one of the parents is thought to have a negative effect on the development of the child. The presence of both parents (for identification) is vitally important for the personal and psycho-sexual development of children. Developmental problems are therefore related directly to the absence of one of the biological parents in a single-parent or stepfamily.

A family's social situation can also have a strong influence on the quality of the living environment and family circumstances. Material factors can have a direct influence on the immaterial aspects of life. For many single-parent families (especially mother-headed families) divorce means a substantial financial setback. A drop in income and social status can have far-reaching material consequences for the children: less money for food, clothing and school. As a result of the poor social circumstances in which many single-parent families live, children of single-parent families will more likely grow up in (relative) poverty than children of nuclear families. This can have a negative effect on their future prospects.

Children suffer quite considerably from family conflicts preceding, during and after a divorce. Divorce often goes hand in hand with arguments and friction; harmonious divorces are relatively uncommon. The tensions of a bad marriage prior to divorce and conflicts about money and the children are painful experiences for the children involved. Adjusting to a new family environment, divided loyalties and parentification following divorce place a heavy burden on children. Stress, feelings of insecurity and uncertainty have an adverse effect on the development of a child. Conflicts are not specific to single-parent families; they also arise in nuclear families and stepfamilies. However, children of divorced parents are more likely to be confronted with such a situation. In that sense, the family structure makes no difference. The quality of the environment in which a child grows up is far more important.

#### *Stress theory in a transactional framework*

For the purpose of this study a number of general theories from various disciplines were combined to form a model and were then applied to the specific subject matter: the consequences of parental changes for children. Three complementary theoretical perspectives form the basis of the model: Lazarus and Rutter's stress theory (1976, 1979), Sameroff and



Chandler's transactionism (1975) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979). By combining these three perspectives, we were able to draw up a conceptual model which served as the basis for our study. Common to all three approaches is the multi-conditional perspective; after all, various factors play a role in the development of children.

A conceptual model was designed on the basis of the definition of the problem and the theoretical perspectives. Three clusters of factors - relating to the child, the family and the broader social environment - were defined along the lines of Garmezy's classification (1985). Three concentric circles were constructed: the child is represented in the innermost circle, the family in the middle circle and the social environment in the outer circle. The centre of the model represents the dependent variable: aspects of the development of the child which are influenced by various factors (such as parental changes). What we have here is a transactional process: a permanent interplay of the various factors. The three circles can be seen as subsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As in stress research, a distinction is made between protective and risk factors (Garmezy, 1985). Risk factors will have an adverse effect, and result in developmental problems. Protective factors, on the other hand, will have a favourable effect and will be able to keep the negative effects of parental changes to a minimum. These factors have a direct and indirect influence on the development of a child.

The innermost circle comprises the child's characteristics: gender, age, type of school, personal development, social intercourse, and how the child copes at school.<sup>12</sup> The second circle comprises information on the family: personal details of the parent, material circumstances, family events, family relations and interactions. The outer circle includes information on the social environment, such as embeddedness in the social network, support systems, social intercourse and contacts with the absent parent.

The following assumption underlies this research: the degree to which the family structure (parental changes) influences the development of children is determined by a subtle interplay of various factors taken from three clusters (the child, the family and the social environment).

With the aid of this model, we hope to find an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article: To what extent do the living conditions and development of children in single-

parent families, stepfamilies and nuclear families differ? And to what extent are these differences caused by divorce or remarriage (i.e. the family structure)? We have based our analysis on the parents' opinions regarding their development and living conditions.

#### **4. Method**

The data used for this article were taken from a written survey held among 1596 families in 1991. The research population can be divided into three types of families: nuclear families, single-parent families and stepfamilies. A representative national sample was taken to ensure that the results would be generally applicable. A total of 5000 families (nuclear, single-parent and stepfamilies) were selected on the basis of the degree of urbanisation, number of inhabitants and regional distribution of their place of residence. These families met the following criteria: at least one child aged between 12 and 17 was still living at home (with a view to the qualitative follow-up survey during which these children will be interviewed); the parents got divorced prior to 15 January 1989 (two years before the questionnaire was sent off); there had been no cases of divorce in the nuclear families; the single-parent families were formed after one divorce only; the stepfamilies were formed after one divorce and one remarriage only.

A written questionnaire was drawn up on the basis of a definition of the problem, a study of existing literature and the conceptual research model, and sent to the people selected. The questionnaire included questions asking for both objective information and subjective opinions from the individual respondents. The survey provided a great deal of useful material. Almost 1600 families (32% of those approached) were willing to take part in the survey: 852 nuclear families, 458 single-parent families and 286 stepfamilies.

It is difficult to determine how representative the sample is since the necessary data about non-response were lacking. Data regarding the research groups were therefore compared with statistics of the Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics (population statistics taken from NCBS population registers) as well as with comparable studies. From these findings we can draw the cautious conclusion that the research population is representative.<sup>13</sup> This article aims to present a more or less representative picture of the living conditions and development of children in different types of families. We placed a number of restrictions on the survey population. First



of all, we have focused on adolescents only, for practical reasons (possibility to study them during the second phase) and because the reactions of young children differ too strongly. Secondly, we have restricted our survey population to families in which the parents got divorced at least two years ago. This choice was made in view of the fact that existing literature on divorce states that people need two years to come to terms with divorce. Thirdly, we have concentrated on the subjective opinion of the parent. The questions about the family structure and living environment in which the child grows up were posed to the parent. Needless to say, this is a major drawback. It is difficult to measure the validity of subjective answers since they may have been prompted by ideas about what is socially desirable.

We included the following aspects of the respondents' **material living conditions** in our analysis:

Financial situation:	net family income, spendable income; source(s) of income; managing with the available income; changes in income level.
Housing situation:	actual housing situation, satisfaction with living conditions, degree of urbanisation, changes in housing situation.
Labour force participation:	job situation, profession, type of job, job satisfaction, changes in job situation.

The following aspects of the **development of children** were included in our analysis:

Relationship between child and parent, relationship between child and brothers and sisters, relationship with non-custodial parent, performance at school, problems at school, relationship with peer group, showing emotions, independence, health. We did not study specific behavioral patterns, but focused on aspects of the child's overall development.

Also included in our analysis was background information about the family, the parents and the children, such as birth order, family size, sex and age of family members, the highest level of education, type of school, political preferences, nationality, date of divorce, date of marriage, and date of formation of stepfamily.



## 5. The findings

This article compares children from various types of families. The findings are presented under two main headings. First of all, we shall compare the living environment in which the children grow up. The second comparison looks into various aspects of their development. We have formulated a number of expectations and tested their validity.

### *5.1. The children's living conditions*

If, indeed, divorce has a negative effect on the living conditions of children, this effect would be reflected in the afore-mentioned indicators. If this were the case there would be significant differences between the living conditions of single-parent and two-parent families at the expense of the former. The comparison includes details on the financial situation, the housing situation and the job situation. It is generally believed that single-parent families are at a relative disadvantage compared with two-parent families since divorce is usually accompanied by a financial setback. We studied whether there were significant differences for a number of variables (chi-square with 95% reliability), and tried to find a significant correlation with background variables with the aid of statistical tests.

#### *Are single-parent families worse off?*

##### *Financial situation*

Many single-parent, female-headed families are financially worse off following divorce. Most of these women do not have a paid job when they split up with their husbands. A major share of the family income is lost as a result of divorce; this generally means a drop in financial wellbeing. For many, a family income from paid employment is replaced by a social security benefit within a relatively short period of time. Mothers who had a paid job before they got divorced generally suffer less of a financial setback. Women are more likely to be less well-educated than men, to have a less well-paid job and thus a lower family income. In single-parent families one parent has to bear a double burden: responsibility for running the household and bringing up the children on the one hand, and earning a living on the other. It is certainly not

an easy task to combine these jobs. Many women who had a paid job when they were married opt for motherhood following divorce (either because they have no choice or of their own volition) and have to resort to social welfare or another type of social security benefit.

We expect that most single-parent households (especially mother-headed families) get by on a relatively low income from a social security benefit or otherwise. This group generally face greater financial problems than other groups. Their financial situation improves appreciably following remarriage, especially in stepfather families in which the divorced mother remarries. This puts an end to the disadvantaged level of income and the gloomy prospects for the future. So, it was generally expected that the financial situation of single-parent and two-parent families would differ considerably; smaller differences were expected between nuclear families and stepfamilies.

The findings of our survey substantiate these assumptions. The net family income and spendable income are significantly lower in single-parent families than in nuclear and stepfamilies. On average, households headed by single mothers are financially deprived. Half of all single-parent families (especially mother-headed families) depend on social welfare. For almost all two-parent families a wage for a paid job is the main source of income. Divorced parents were more likely to answer that they were unable, or hardly able to survive on their family income. Divorced fathers with older children, parents with one child and dual-income households faced fewer financial problems. The survey showed that the financial situation of children in mother-headed families was felt to be worse than that of children in two-parent families. At least half of all children in single-parent families grow up in families that depend on social welfare, or less.

Families are considerably worse off financially following divorce. More than half of the single-parent households said their income had dropped. Divorce usually heralds a period of financial hardship in which the family can hardly get by, especially for single mothers and their children. This is particularly hard on children: in addition to the emotional problems they face after their parents split up, they are also worse off financially. In three-quarters of the cases studied, the formation of a stepfamily meant an improvement in their financial situation; on the whole, stepfamilies have no problems getting by on their income.



### *Housing situation*

Many families have to move house following divorce or remarriage. Initially, only one of the parents usually leaves the marital home on splitting up, but the other is often forced to move house as well at a later date. Many single-parent families have to move to a lesser quality home because of their less comfortable financial situation. Moving house following divorce is generally seen as taking a step back. We expected that the housing situation of children who grow up in single-parent families would be less favourable in certain respects than that of two-parent families. In cases of remarriage, parents also sometimes move house. When two households come together to form a single family, one or both of the families move house. As a rule, the family size increases and the financial situation improves. In such cases moving house is for the better. That is why we expected to find very few differences between the housing situation of nuclear families and stepfamilies.

The results show that children in single-parent families tend to live in modest homes, such as apartments or small terraced houses. Parents of children in single-parent households are less positive about the homes they live in than parents in two-parent households. The housing situation of stepfamilies is comparable to that of nuclear families. Children in single-parent families and stepfamilies mostly live in urban areas. Nuclear families are more likely to live in smaller towns.

Divorce and the formation of a new stepfamily often have repercussions for a family's housing situation (68% and 71%, respectively). More than half of all divorced mothers move house following divorce; one-third of all divorced fathers move to a new home. However, the percentage of parents who are positive about the new housing situation is equal to the percentage who are negative about it. Many families have to move once again if a new stepfamily is formed. More than half move to a new home. In almost all cases, this is a move for the better.

### *Job situation*

Divorce and remarriage can have consequences for the employment situation of women. Many mothers do not have jobs as long as they are married. Following divorce, some decide to take

a job to supplement their family income. Others, however, decide to stop working because of the heavy burden; it is often difficult to combine a paid job with the upbringing of one's children. It is not easy to find a suitable (part-time) job, or a job which pays enough to be worthwhile. The availability of suitable childcare facilities may also influence the parents' decision to take a job, or not. The job situation may change once again, if the divorcee remarries. Since responsibilities are shared, they may either decide to stop working, or take on a job again. We expected to find differences in the job situation between parents (in particular mothers) in different types of families. Labour force participation of heads of household is likely to be lower in single-parent families. However, labour force participation of divorced mothers could well be higher than that of married or remarried mothers.

Our expectations were substantiated by the survey findings. Participation in the labour force was lower among heads of household in single-parent families than among those in nuclear families and stepfamilies. However, divorced mothers more often had a job than mothers in nuclear and stepfamilies. Children in single-parent families are more likely to have a working mother than children in other families. So, divorce and the formation of a stepfamily following remarriage also bring about changes in the job situation. One quarter of all divorced parents decide to take on a job following divorce; a smaller number decide to stop working. After remarriage, some parents stop working but a much larger percentage seize the opportunity to participate on the labour market.

### *5.2. The development of children*

If it is true that parental changes (through divorce and remarriage) have a negative effect on children, children in single-parent families and stepfamilies would face greater problems than children who grow up in two-parent families and who have never experienced parental changes. If parental changes were to have no influence, or a positive influence on the development of children, this would also be revealed by the indicators used in our study. If this were the case either no differences would be found, or else children in nuclear families would be disadvantaged. A comparison between children who grow up in single-parent families and children who are raised in nuclear families and stepfamilies will provide more insight into this matter.



A review of existing literature shows that parental changes can have a strong short-term influence on the children involved. But after a turbulent period of a year or two, a more stable phase sets in. The negative effects gradually disappear and most children seem to have coped with the changes. However, the long-term effects are harder to measure. It is not clear whether children raised in single-parent or stepfamilies feel the effects in the long term. In most families studied, the parental changes took place more than two years ago. That is why we expected the differences between the various groups of children to be relatively small.

### *Family relations*

Since **parent and child** are thrown back on each other quite heavily in the single-parent period following divorce, strong relationships often develop. If a stepparent joins the family, this intense relationship between parent and child can be shattered.

We expected there to be differences of opinion regarding the parent-child relationship between the various types of families. Children in single-parent families may have a better relationship with their parent than children in two-parent households. Children in stepfamilies are more often faced with problems and conflicts with their (biological) parent than children in other types of families.

In the case of remarriage, children are faced with a new stepparent. Some children find it difficult to accept this new parent; they experience the change as a kind of second divorce. Subsequently, the children may harbour negative feelings towards the stepparent, such as complicated divided loyalties, rivalry and jealousy. The stepparent may also find it difficult to determine the best way to relate to the child, and may suffer from a fear of being rejected, rivalry and feelings of guilt. We expect that children in nuclear families have a better relationship with their other (non-respondent, biological) parent than children in stepfamilies have with their (non-biological) stepparent.

The same may be expected of the relationship between **brothers and sisters** in one and the same family. Since the relationship between family members in single-parent households is so strong, we expect that brothers and sisters get on better than they do in other types of families. The arrival of new brothers and sisters in a stepfamily is not always welcomed by the children involved. Relationships in stepfamilies become more numerous and problems become more

complicated. Stepbrothers and stepsisters have no natural sense of loyalty towards one another; in fact, sibling rivalry is quite common in stepfamilies.

On the whole, our research findings are positive in this respect. The relationship between the child concerned and other family members is felt to be positive in all types of families. Children get on well with their father and mother as well as with their brothers and sisters. Girls generally get on better with other family members than boys do, and the relationship with the mother appears to be more positive than the relationship with the father. On average, children in nuclear families have a better relationship with their parents, brothers and sisters than children in single-parent and stepfamilies. Children who grow up in single-parent families run into conflicts with their parent relatively more often than other children do. Children in stepfamilies generally have a better relationship with their biological parent than with their stepparent, with whom they come into conflict more often.

#### *Performance at school*

It is usually the father who moves out of the parental home following divorce. Existing literature assumes that the absence of a father may result in a loss of parental authority, and in less assistance with and attention for the child's school work (Bosman & Louwes, 1992). Mothers tend to be less interested in encouraging their children to have high aspirations as far as their schooling goes. Children are often confronted with a fear of failure because of the tensions and changes accompanying divorce; their school work suffers as a result. These factors are believed to influence the child's performance at school. Various studies have shown that children in single-parent families do less well than those in nuclear families. When the divorced parent remarries, the child is confronted with a new adult, usually a stepfather; this means a reinstatement of authority. The presence of a stepfather improves the performance of children at school compared with the period in which they lived with their mother only. That is why we expect children in mother-headed families to do less well and to have more problems at school than children in father-headed and two-parent families.

Our survey revealed significant differences between the children: on average, the performance of children raised in nuclear families and stepfamilies is better than that of children in single-parent families.



### *Making friends*

Some children react negatively and show a lack of understanding for other children whose parents have split up. In some cases, the child involved begins to avoid contact with his or her peers for fear of being rejected. Since divorce can give rise to violent reactions and aggressive behaviour by the (young) child involved, his or her peers may in their turn withdraw and avoid contact with the child. So, divorce may lead to evasive behaviour on both sides. Children in single-parent families in particular are expected to have fewer friends than children in two-parent households. Children in stepfamilies generally have fewer problems in this respect since the two-parent family situation has been restored.

Our research results show that children in nuclear families have more contact with their peer group than children in other types of families; children in stepfamilies have slightly less contact with friends.

### *Showing emotions*

The unsettling experiences which accompany parental changes may stall the emotional development of a child. The departure of one of the parents as well as the arrival of a new partner in the home can upset the child's emotional balance. In some children this evokes feelings of guilt, fear, insecurity, fear of being abandoned, fantasies about being reunited, and divided loyalties. This may have a long-term negative effect on the child's ability to show emotion. That is why we expect there to be differences between children in single-parent families and stepfamilies and children who are raised in two-parent families where both biological parents are present. Children in nuclear families are expected to be more open as far as showing emotions goes.

The survey showed that children in nuclear families did indeed find it easier to show their emotions than other children; children in stepfamilies tend to be more closed than children in nuclear families and single-parent families. Girls find it easier to show their emotions than boys.

### *Independence*

Children in single-parent families have a greater say in matters because of the absence of one of their parents. They have more freedom and more responsibility and therefore become independent at an earlier age. Children in single-parent families are therefore expected to be less dependent on their (custodial) parent than children raised in nuclear families. In the event of the formation of a stepfamily, these children suddenly lose their responsibilities and acquired independence. Some children see this as a positive change; they are relieved that they no longer have to carry the burden of responsibility. Other children, however, display regressive behaviour; they latch onto their (biological) parent and are more dependent than they were before.

Our survey results show that children in single-parent families are most independent of all. Children in nuclear families tend to be slightly more dependent than children in both single-parent and stepfamilies.

### *Health*

Some children, especially young children, suffer from physical ailments such as stomachache, headache, backache, asthma, earache and fatigue following the sudden trauma of divorce. These psychosomatic disorders can do permanent damage to a child's health. The child's health can also be affected by factors such as stress accompanying the formation of a new stepfamily. That is why we expect to find more physical disorders and poorer health among children raised in single-parent and stepfamilies than in nuclear families.

All children were found to be in good health. Children in two-parent families tend to be slightly healthier than children in single-parent families, but the difference is very slight.

### *Non-custodial parent*

Points of view presented in existing literature generally agree that being able to see the non-custodial parent plays an important role in coming to terms with parental changes. If the child has a good relationship with the absent parent, its development in a single-parent family is



generally favourable (Van Gelder, 1989) since it manages to adjust well to the new (single-parent or step-) family situation.

Contact with the absent parent is more often broken off in stepfamilies than in single-parent families. One quarter of all children in single-parent families have lost contact with the non-custodial parent; in stepfamilies no fewer than 43% of the children lose contact with their absent parent. Moreover, if contact is maintained, the relationship between the child and the absent parent is generally more positive in single-parent families than in stepfamilies. One third of all contacts between the absent parent and a child in a single-parent family are positive; 14% of the contacts are felt to be unpleasant and almost half of the respondents say their relationship is variable to normal. The situation is more or less the same for children in stepfamilies.

### *Social contacts*

Support from friends and relatives acts as a buffer, enabling people to deal with stress when times are rough. Social contacts play an important role in difficult times, such as coping with divorce and the formation of a new (single-parent or step-) family.

Our survey showed that parents in nuclear families were generally more satisfied with their social contacts and the support they received than parents in single-parent or stepfamilies. Parents in single-parent families were generally less satisfied.

## **6. Conclusions**

We shall now draw a few conclusions on the basis of the research findings.

### *The living conditions of single-parent families are felt to be worse*

On the whole the findings of our comparative analysis confirm the assumptions made. As far as material living conditions go, single-parent families are often disadvantaged compared with two-parent families. There are considerable differences between the financial position of single-parent and two-parent families (nuclear and stepfamilies). The spendable income of single-parent

families is significantly lower than that of two-parent households. For at least half of all single-parent families social security benefits constitute their main source of income. Mother-headed single-parent families, in particular, are relatively deprived as far as their financial position goes. They consequently have a harder time getting by on their family income. Parents in single-parent families are less satisfied with their current housing situation, their income, their social contacts and support and assistance from friends and relatives than nuclear families and stepfamilies.

*The living conditions of many mother-headed families deteriorate following divorce*

The findings of our survey substantiate the general expectations. Divorce and the formation of a stepfamily bring about changes in a family's living conditions, in particular in its socio-economic position. The financial status of most parents deteriorates following divorce. A substantial percentage of divorced mothers are faced with a drop in income, and growing up in a financially deprived household has negative consequences for the children involved. The formation of a stepfamily, on the other hand, usually means an improvement in the family's income position. Most families move house following divorce and remarriage. The parent's job situation is also affected; one quarter of all divorced parents enter the labour force, whereas one tenth stop working altogether. It is quite likely that these changes will have repercussions for aspects of a family's living conditions other than the ones analyzed here (housing, employment, financial situation).

*Most children fare better than expected*

The development of children in the various types of families is quite positive: most children fare well. Children in single-parent families do slightly less well in a number of respects than children in two-parent families. The percentage differences are relatively small, despite significant differences between the groups. Compared with children in both single-parent and stepfamilies, children in nuclear families get on well with other family members, they are in good health, their performance at school is good, and they make friends easily. They have no problem showing their emotions, but they are less independent than children in single-parent and stepfamilies. In single-parent and stepfamilies, children fare less well than in nuclear families. However, the percentage differences are quite small. Compared with other children,



children in single-parent families are generally in poorer health, their performance at school is not as good, and they tend to have more conflicts with their (custodial) parent. Children in stepfamilies are generally more closed, they have less contact with their peer group and maintain less contact with their non-custodial parent.

The survey results paint a positive picture. The stereotype negative views on divorce, remarriage and growing up in a single-parent or stepfamily are not substantiated. The differences found between children in single-parent and two-parent families are relatively small. This does not mean, however, that parental changes do not have negative consequences for children. A small percentage of children face problems and are disadvantaged as far as their development goes. But the effects are less serious than some (pessimists) claim. The consequences of parental changes are not as significant as is generally believed.

## 7. Discussion

### *A critical note*

We shall conclude with a number of critical remarks. Our survey has a major methodological limitation, namely that the research results are based on subjective answers and can therefore not be easily interpreted. We based our analysis of the living conditions and development of children mainly on the opinions given by the custodial parents. This could result in a biased representation. We opted for the perception of the parents for various reasons. Quantitative research aims to describe the changes and differences in living conditions and the development of children; the parents' opinions appear to be quite reliable. Moreover, we assume that parents generally present a valid explication of the development of their children.

### *The future*

Divorce almost inevitably leads to financial setback. Women in particular face financial problems after they split up with their husbands. Children in mother-headed families grow up with less material welfare and have to cope with a lower standard of living. This has a negative effect on their future prospects. Problems in (mother-headed) single-parent families are therefore

usually caused by their poor financial situation rather than by the family composition. How can government improve the deprived situation of mother-headed families? The Dutch government has begun providing facilities and implementing measures in various areas with a view to improving the situation of mother-headed families. Such legal and financial facilities include raising the personal allowance (tax-exempted) for single parents, tax-deductible home help and childcare, and raising the level of social welfare benefits.

There are many more possible ways in which the government could help these families. Such a government policy would have to stimulate female labour force participation, reduce the economic dependency of women, and increase the responsibility of men towards their families. Such measures should be directed at men and women in general, not solely at single-parent families. If single-parent families were to receive exclusive attention, it could lead to their further stigmatisation. Such stigmatisation should be avoided now that society at large is beginning to accept single-parent families.

#### *Research: transversal and longitudinal*

Scientific research, too, should not focus exclusively on single-parent families. It is important that the population studied includes various types of families (transversal research) over a prolonged period of time (longitudinal research).

As this article shows, this issue demands an in-depth approach. The influence of divorce and remarriage on the development of children is the result of a complex interplay of various factors. The results of our survey merely lift the tip of the veil. In view of the complexity of the process, the exact role and significance of the different factors remain unclear. The best method would be to subject each individual to an in-depth psychological analysis. Such analyses should include information about the child, the family, and the social environment in order to be able to determine which combinations of factors are detrimental and which are conducive to the development of the child concerned. We can gain deeper insight into the long-term influence of parental changes by studying children in various types of families over a prolonged period of time. This would contribute to a useful discussion on divorce, remarriage, single-parent families and stepfamilies.



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## 9. Notes

1. See: Ferri, 1976; Shinn, 1978; Cox & Cox, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Goetting, 1981; Kurdek, 1981, 1983; Emery, 1982; Schlesinger, 1982; Hetherington, Camara & Featherman, 1983; Belsky, Lerner & Spanier, 1984; Hanson, 1985; Demo & Acock, 1988; Hetherington & Camara, 1984, 1988; Krantz, 1988.
2. Van den Akker & Zeijl, 1983; Delft & Niphuis-Nell, 1988; Van Gelder, 1989.
3. This is no Dutch research.
4. Wilson & Zurcher, 1975 and others; Glenn & Weaver, 1977; Burr & Holman, 1980; Macklin, 1980.
5. Kahan & Perkins, 1979; Brown & Walker, 1979; Messinger & Walker, 1979.
6. Jacobson, 1979.
7. Goldmeier, 1980; Kent, 1980.
8. Keshet & Rosenthal, 1978.
9. Visher, E. & Visher, J., In: Stepfamilies: A guide to working with Stepparents and Stepchildren, New York, 1979.
10. Maddox, 1975; Noble & Noble, 1979.
11. Cohen-Matthijsen, 1976; Dingelhoff-Lehr, 1982.
12. M.B.D. or Minimal Brain Dysfunction
13. See also the book "Kinderen na echtscheiding en hertrouw" (Children following divorce and remarriage), S.P.M. Dölle, Tilburg, TUP, 1993.



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